2007

Review of, Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins

Rachel Meyers
Iowa State University, rlmeyers@iastate.edu

Review of, Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins

Abstract
The book under review, *Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins,* is a slim catalogue designed to accompany an exhibit of the same name held at the Nicholson Museum in Sydney, Australia between April and September 2007. Overall the catalogue is enjoyable to read and would be an asset to anyone wishing to gain a quick overview of the Roman Empire through its coinage. It could also be adopted as a supplementary text or resource for a survey course of Roman history as a way of integrating material and literary evidence.

Disciplines
Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity

Comments
This book review is from *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 11 (2007): 1. Posted with permission.

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2007.11.15

Peter Brennan, Michael Turner, Nicholas L. Wright, *Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins*. Sydney: Nicholson Museum, University of Sydney, 2007. Pp. 83. ISBN 1-86487-833-9. AU$20.00.

Reviewed by Rachel Meyers, Iowa State University (rlmeyers@iastate.edu)
Word count: 1644 words

The book under review, *Faces of Power: Imperial Portraiture on Roman Coins*, is a slim catalogue designed to accompany an exhibit of the same name held at the Nicholson Museum in Sydney, Australia between April and September 2007. Overall the catalogue is enjoyable to read and would be an asset to anyone wishing to gain a quick overview of the Roman Empire through its coinage. It could also be adopted as a supplementary text or resource for a survey course of Roman history as a way of integrating material and literary evidence.

The contents may be briefly summarized. A brief forward by Michael Turner, a Senior Curator at the Nicholson Museum, prefaces Peter Brennan's introduction to the catalogue. A map (p. 6) highlights the mints of the Roman Empire as well as other important cities. Nicholas Wright provides a "Quick Guide to Roman Coins" before the catalogue itself. Appended to the end of the book are simplified genealogical trees for the Julio-Claudians, the Antonines, the Severans, and the families of Constantine I and of Theodosius I. Finally, there is a coin index including the coin number in the catalogue, the name of the ruler (or family member), and the years of his rule.

Brennan, a professor in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Sydney, gives a brief introduction to the Roman Empire, its history and emperors, generalities about the principate, and its use of propaganda. The "Quick Guide" will be useful to those new to numismatics, for it provides one with the basic tools for reading and interpreting a Roman coin. Wright starts with an explanation of the Roman naming system, comprising the praenomen (generally abbreviated; list given), the nomen, and the cognomen (list of those included in exhibition given). As the Romans tended to abbreviate words in coin legends, it is essential to recognize these abridgments, and a register of the most common abbreviations in the catalogue is provided. Another list is composed of names of divinities, descriptive terms (e.g., radiate and togate), and items (e.g., quadriga and caduceus) that are depicted on coins. The final page before the catalogue inventories the primary denominations of Roman currency, both before and after Diocletian's revaluations in 294.

The exhibit at the Nicholson Museum gathered together 132 coins (thirty-three borrowed from other collections, the remainder from their own) minted over five centuries, from Julius

Caesar to Zeno. The coins, chosen for how well they depict the use or abuse of power, are varied as to their denomination and mint of production. Some were produced at Rome, others at provincial cities around the empire given the permission to mint.1 Most of the selected coins are in good condition, though the details of some are barely discernible (particularly nos. 17, 40, 87, and 124).

Since it would be impractical to review each coin entry separately here, I will first provide a description of the general characteristics of the catalogue and then offer comments on particular coins that stood out for one reason or another. Each coin is provided with basic details followed by a two- or three-paragraph biographical entry.2 The basic details include the name of the individual depicted, the mint, and date or range of dates, denomination, the obverse legend and description of the portrait, the reverse legend and description of the image, the museum inventory number, and a reference to one of the standard numismatic publications (such as BMC, RIC, or Hunterian Collection).

Each biographical entry manages to pack in a surprising amount of information about the ruler and his family members. These entries, most written by Brennan, read a bit like Suetonius, who surely must be a major source for the early emperors, for they are peppered with the "juicy" bits of intrigue or famous sayings associated with many of Rome's rulers, such as Vespasian's "I think I'm becoming a god" remark before his death.3 The short biographies are clear, concise, and even witty. This reviewer appreciated the heading under the year 69: "One damn emperor after another" (p. 25).

Since iconography and legends are repeated on numerous coins over time, images depicting something new and different really stand out. An example of such a novelty is coin no. 15 of Nero, whose portrait is on the obverse. The reverse illustrates from a birds-eye view the harbor at Ostia: seven ships, a portico, a statue, a recumbent Neptune, and a dolphin. The harbor was begun by Claudius, but Nero takes credit for its completion here. This sestertius is a fine specimen of craftsmanship, and is certainly one that deserves to be seen on a larger scale (see below).

Coin no. 26, a dupondius of Trajan from Rome, uses one of his best known titles on the reverse. Trajan was honored as Optimus Princeps in 103 as a reflection of the people's high regard for him. Oddly, no coin of his wife Plotina was included in the exhibition, though his niece Matidia is represented.

Coin no. 45 depicts Geta, son of Septimius Severus, with puerile chubbiness; he even seems to have a smile on his face. This obverse image coordinates well with the depiction on the reverse of *Felicitas* and the message *Felicitas Temporum*. The message, The Good Fortune of the Times, was broadly used by the Antonine family to promote a period of relative peace in the empire and to celebrate the many children of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina the Younger. Here, on Geta's coin from 198-200, the message is painful irony for the entirely infelicitous fate that will be brought upon Geta at the hands of his brother Caracalla in the near future.

The presentation of the coins along with the biographical entries does raise some interesting points. For example, seeing the coins of the many short-lived rulers (e.g., Vetranio, no. 108, in 350), does make one wish more was known about the minting process itself. How long did

it take to order the crafting of a die? To what extent did the emperor oversee the selection of images? How quickly were the coins distributed? Quintillus (coin no. 80) is said to have ruled for less than one month, yet coins bearing his portrait were minted. Unfortunately we know very little about the actual manufacture of Roman coins so questions like these may never be answered.

As is sometimes the case in propagandistic messages, the lack of a particular imperial quality is covered up by over-emphasis on its presence. For example, coins regularly proclaim peace in times of war. In the entry on Valentinian I, Brennan states that "Rome became even more the symbol of stable, united Empire, when the emperors were elsewhere" (67). Coin no. 112 of Valens shows *Urbs Roma* on the reverse, even though Valens had never set foot in the city.

While the catalogue is, overall, a fine publication, I will point out a few minor objections and errors. The book, printed on glossy paper, includes color photographs of each coin. However, an indication of the scale of the coins is entirely lacking. They all appear to be about the same size, which is misleading since denarii and aurei, for example, were much smaller than the large bronze sestertii. Certainly visitors to the exhibit would be able to discern such essential differences, but a novice, leafing through the book, would miss them.

Although a list of common abbreviations is provided at the beginning of the catalogue, it would have been more helpful if the abbreviated words in the legends were spelled out in each entry, as they often are in epigraphic publications. From the year 395 on, the coins of the rulers in the East are treated, then those of the rulers in the West. While this organization allows the reader to follow the succession of emperors in each part of the Empire, it creates a disjointed picture of events in the Empire as a whole. The catalogue ends abruptly and there is no conclusion to the book. The approach to this volume is minimalist but some kind of epilogue or concluding essay might have rounded out the fine presentation of the coins.

On p. 33 it is stated that Faustina the Younger died in 174, though the entry for Crispina on p. 35 provides the correct date (176). The accession of Maximinus was 235 not 238 (the date of his death) as on p. 44. In the biographical entry of Gallienus and Salonina, her coin is said to represent Venus Fortuna, though the legend is Venus Felix, as the catalogue entry for no. 73 correctly states. However, these are all minor objections and errors and do not greatly affect one's enjoyment or understanding of the material.

The catalogue intends to provide a condensed account of the history of the Roman Empire and to demonstrate the worth of coins beyond their monetary value. In spite of the minor objections above, it succeeds at both aims. The guide introduces the newcomer or student both to coinage and to Roman imperial history, albeit with an emphasis on the more tantalizing episodes and intrigues associated with many emperors. Brennan's expertise in the later Roman Empire contributes to the interesting anecdotes of the fourth- and fifth-century emperors, who are often skipped over or completely left out of many Roman history survey courses. Many scholars and students of numismatics now acknowledge propagandistic aspects of coinage.4 Coins, because of their durability and portability, could be used by rulers to broadcast particular messages, and thus we can often learn much from them. Very often sentiments or representations not revealed in literary sources are propagated on coins. The selection and discussion of the coins in this catalogue points out this extra-monetary function

of ancient coinage.

Certainly this catalogue served its purpose in accompanying the exhibit at the Nicholson Museum and will also be adequate in other contexts as an introductory guide to Roman coinage.

Notes:

1. While these are more commonly called Roman provincial coins today, the catalogue uses the older term Greek Imperials.
2. Some coins of members of the same family--for example, Philip I the Arab, his wife Marcia Otacilia Severa, and their son Philip II--are treated as a set and discussed together in one biographical entry.
3. See coin 21 in the catalogue, a denarius of Vespasian with captive Judaea on the reverse. Suetonius, *Divus Vesp.* 23.4 is the source of this comment: "Vae, puto deus fio."
4. See, for example, A. Burnett, *Coinage in the Roman World* (London, 1987) esp. pp. 66-85; B. Levick, "Messages on the Roman Coinage: Types and Inscriptions" in George M. Paul (ed.), *Roman Coins and Public Life under the Empire* (Ann Arbor, 1999), pp. 41-60.

Read Latest	Index for 2007	Change Greek Display	Archives	Books Available for Review	BMCR Home

HTML generated at 13:32:25, Friday, 03 April 2009